



THE CLASH BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: PAST, TRADITION, MYTHS VS. PRESENT, MODERNITY, HOPES

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Abstract: *The present paper highlights the clash between two different worlds and cultures presented by Louise Erdrich in ‘The Antelope Wife’. Rooted in the Native American myth, the novel is set in contemporary Minneapolis. The plot shifts between the Civil War time and the late 1990s as well as between tradition and modernity or between myths and reality. ‘The Antelope Wife’ is an amazing family saga, an excellent portrait of three generations of a Native American family, and at the same time, a mysterious and breathtaking network of traditions, myths, loss and longing. This particular split between communities, languages and identities is best illustrated by the Ojibwa word ‘daashkikaa’, that is ‘splitting apart’, which turns into a traditional concept of paramount importance in the novel. Thus, the double world split into two, torn between past and present, is very well represented by Erdrich’s characters. The two protagonists, Rozin and Richard, seem to have bridged the gap between two worlds: that of Native American traditions and beliefs versus the seemingly ordered and more logical world of Minneapolis. Nevertheless, a strange event breaks the fragile balance between the two poles, and forces them to confront, and eventually accept their past as an inextricable part of themselves. In the process, the characters are hurt and wounded, suffer painful losses or even lose their lives. ‘The Antelope Wife’ can be perceived as a myth of the rebirth of the Native American culture and the revitalization of the Ojibwa cultural group.*

Keywords: *clash, Native Americans, culture, literature, community, myth, tradition, reality, modernity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Louise Erdrich is a representative of the second wave of the *Native American Renaissance* dealing in her novel entitled *The Antelope Wife* with the issue of identity as well as with complex family relationships against the background of the Ojibwa culture (Pîrnuță & Bădulescu, 2011:22). Erdrich’s fiction consists of patterned designs derived from the Ojibwa culture inherited from her mother and having German influences which come from her father. *The Antelope Wife* is an amazing family saga, an excellent portrait of three generations of a Native American family and at the same time a mysterious and breathtaking network of tradition, myth, loss and longing.

The plot shifts between the Civil War time and the late 1990s as well as between tradition and modernity or myth and reality.

2. THE CLASH BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

The present paper aims at highlighting the clash between two different worlds, cultures, languages, identities.

The Ojibwa word *daashkikaa* turns into a recurrent motif throughout the novel, its meaning being ‘split apart’ or ‘cracked apart’. Thus, the double world split into two, torn between past and present, is very well represented by Erdrich’s characters. The two protagonists, Rozin and Richard, seem to have bridged the gap between the two worlds: that of Native American traditions and beliefs versus the seemingly ordered and more logical world of Minneapolis.

The clash between the two previously mentioned worlds can be illustrated at several levels: language and names; miracles, myths

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and traditions; clothing and food; scenery and environment.

2.1. Language and Names. At the linguistic level, it is worth to mention Erdrich's use of Native American terms and concepts but also proper names.

Thus, every part of the novel bears a number expressed both in English and in the Ojibwa language: Part One – *Bayzhig*, Part Two – *Neej*, Part Three – *Niswey*, Part Four – *Neewin*.

Another recurrent term is *windigo*, which means mythological spirit: 'I've been watching this girl. Maybe she's a windigo. No, said her mother. She's only that hungry. Nothing wrong with her' (Erdrich, 2002:55). According to Peter G. Beidler, *windigo* can be associated with a winter cannibal monster or a starvation winter beast, a spirit of excess (Beidler, 2003:67).

Makuk can be considered another Ojibwa word which appears several times in the novel: 'Blue Prairie Woman picks with swift grace and fills a new-made makuk' (Erdrich, 2002:18); '[She] slices its stiff moan in half and collects in the berry-filled makuk its gurgle of dark blood' (Erdrich, 2002:19). Thus, *makuk* stands for a birchbark container, box or basket.

Tikinagun and *powwow* are also used recurrently in the discourse as both represent important elements within the Native American culture. The Ojibwa word *tikinagun* means cradle board: 'Deep in the past during a spectacular cruel raid upon an isolated Ojibwa village mistaken for hostile during the scare over the starving Sioux, a dog bearing upon its back a frame-board tikinagun enclosing a child in moss, velvet, embroideries of beads, was frightened into the vast carcass of the world west of the Otter Tail River' (Erdrich, 2002:4). *Powwow* refers to any gathering of Native Americans of any cultural group; they meet to dance, sing as well as socialize.

Other recurrent words are the following ones: *ninimoshe* standing for 'my sweetheart' or 'my love', *animosh* for dog, *anokee* for work, *indis* meaning belly button, *mashkimood* referring to any bag or sack, *howah* being the

equivalent of okay, *manomin* meaning wild rice, *chimoos* referring to white people, *manidominenz* signifying bead or 'little spirit seed' or the Ojibwa *ogitchidaa-ikwe* hinting to

Any strong woman or 'soldier woman' (Beidler, 2003:63-67).

Concerning proper names, there are usually given both in Ojibwa/*Ojibwemowin* and in English/ *Zhaaganaashimowin*: for instance, *OZHAWASHKWAMASHKODEYKWAY* for Blue Prairie Woman, *Apijigo Bakaday* for So Hungry, *Midassbaupayikway* for Ten Stripe Woman, *Bungeenaboop* for Almost Soup, *Gakahbekong* for Mineapolis or *Mishimin Odaynang* for Apple Town standing for the same Minneapolis.

Also, a dog named *Sorrow* is 'the dog nursed on human milk [that] grew up coyote gray and clever, a light-boned, loping bitch who followed Blue Prairie Woman everywhere' (Erdrich, 2002:15); thus, the name is translated word by word from Ojibwa just like in the case of *Other Side of the Earth* named for 'the place toward which she traveled' (Erdrich, 2002:14).

In opposition to these names, there are others which are obviously belonging to the white American world: Roy, Mary, Klaus, Frank, Cally, Deanna. If the first generation bears Native American names (Blue Prairie Woman), for the second a combination between Ojibwa and English is characteristic (Klaus Shawano) while the third generation is dominated by English names (Cally Roy).

2.2 Miracles, Myths, Traditions. In the very beginning of the novel a miracle happens when in despair Scranton Roy manages to feed the baby miraculously: 'She seized him. Inhaled him. Her suck was fierce. His whole body was astonished, most of all the inoffensive nipple he'd never noticed or appreciated until, in spite of the pain, it served to gain him peace' (Erdrich, 2002:6).

The dog named *Almost Soup*, condemned to death because of his white fur (the Native Americans sacrificed white dogs and ate their flesh), only survives by dog magic: 'You will end up puppy soup if you're born a pure white dog on the reservation, unless you're one who

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is extra clever, like me. I survived into my old age through dog magic' (Erdrich, 2002:75). Also, a whole chapter is written from the perspective of this outstanding creature.

Another miracle can be considered the communication of the humans with animals as in the case of *So Hungry* with a deer who practically becomes her husband: 'He loves me, she thought. He loves me and I love him back. Right down to the ground. Who he is. No different. Of course, too bad that he's a deer' (Erdrich, 2002:56).

Likewise, when *Blue Prairie Woman* dies, she sings a song and faces west while her long lost daughter looks towards the same direction and sings the same song as if aware of her mother's death: 'passionate, surprised, she dies when her chest fills, kicking and drumming her heels on the hollow earth. At last she is still, gazing west. That is the direction her daughter sits facing all the next day and the next' (Erdrich, 2002:19).

Concerning the Native American myths and traditions, Ojibwa people obviously believe in the looming appearance of a black dog when the end of life is close: 'We all know the great black dog. That is, death. He smells like iron cold. Sparks fly from his fur. He is the one who drags the creaking cart made of sticks' (Erdrich, 2002:82).

The Ojibwa culture can be easily identified with beading, sewing and weaving, terms which also have very rich connotations: 'We dogs know what the women are really doing when they are beading. They are sewing us all into a pattern, into life beneath their hands. We are the beads on the waxed string, pricked up by their sharp needles. We are the tiny pieces of the huge design that they are making – the soul of the world' (Erdrich, 2002:83).

Ojibwa women spend crucial and even sacred moments in their lives while sewing and weaving thus creating patterns of life and influencing the destinies of their children: 'my mother sewed my birth cord, with dry sage and sweet grass, into a turtle holder of soft white buckskin. She beaded that little turtle using precious old cobalts and yellows and Cheyenne pinks and greens in a careful design.

I remember every detail of it, me, because the turtle hung near my crib, then off my belt, and was my very first play toy. I was supposed to have it on me all my life, bury it with me on reservation land, but one day I came in from playing and my indis was gone. I thought nothing of it, at first and for many years, but slowly over time the absence ... it will tell' (Erdrich, 2002:101). The turtle is considered to offer protection to those who possess and cherish it.

Ojibwa people are also safeguarded by their choice of names they are given at their birth. Every change in naming is considered to be a turning point in their life - a change of destiny: 'I named my girls Cally and Deanna. Bad choice. I broke more continuity, and they suffered for it, too. Should have kept the protection. Should have kept the names that gave the protection. Should have kept the old ways just as much as I could, and the tradition that guarded us' (Erdrich, 2002: 35).

On the contrary, Klaus Shawano is selling traditional items to strangers seeming to ignore their sacredness: 'Sometimes they're buying baby moccasins, little beaded ones the size of your big toe. Or the fad is cheap neckerchiefs, bolo slides, jingles. I can sell out before noon if I misjudge my stock, while someone else set up next to me who took on a truckload is raking the money in with both hands. At those times, all I can do is watch. But that day, I had the turtles' (Erdrich, 2002:22).

Frank is working as a baker in a Minneapolis bakery doing his best to gain enough money for his family, in the same way Richard Whiteheart is going to the office everyday and Rozin accompanies her daughters to the schoolbus. Cecille, the nonconformist sister of Frank, owns her kung fu studio: 'she runs her kung fu studio right next to the bakery shop' (Erdrich, 2002:110).

2.3 Clothing and Food. First generation Ojibwa representatives wear traditional clothes made of hides, decorated with beads and pieces of jewelry and embroideries: 'their dance clothes are simple – tanned hide dresses, bone jewelry, white doeskin down the front and two white doeskin panels behind. Classy,

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elegant, they set a new standard of simplicity' (Erdrich, 2002:23).

On the contrary, the newer generations have lost their habit of wearing Ojibwa clothing. For instance, Cecille wears very fashionable clothes, dyes her hair and does not look like an Indian: 'through this, and peroxide, she has made herself a bicep blond Indian with tiny hips and sculptured legs that she shows off by wearing the shortest shorts' (Erdrich, 2002:110).

Another example is Richard Whiteheart, 'an urban Indian', who has forgotten all about tradition and culture when in despair he becomes homeless and an alcoholic: 'Georgetown Hoyas sweatshirt from the Salvation Army with its sleeves chopped off and the bulldog faded. Shorts sagging underneath a watermelon-tight paunch. Shorts held up with rope. Flapping tennies and no socks' (Erdrich, 2002:122).

Traditional Ojibwa food consisted mainly of turtle meat, different kinds of grains and leaves: 'On a cool day in spring in the bud-popping moon the elders held a pitiful feast – only nothing seems pitiful to survivors. In weak sunlight they chewed spring-risen mud-turtle meat, roasted coot, gopher, the remaining sweet grains of manomin, acorns, puckoons from a squirrel's cache, and the fresh spears of dandelion' (Erdrich, 2002:13).

Herbs and plants are of great importance to Native Americans who know both their curative and poisonous effects: 'us Ojibwas have a few teas we brew for very special occasions. This is one. A sleep tea, a love tea' (Erdrich, 2002:29).

In opposition, urban Indians of the third generations, like for instance Cecille, prefer to have processed food like pastry, pies: 'Cecille at the table with the coffee and the pies' (Erdrich, 2002:208).

Frank Shawano wastes a lot of effort throughout his life to recreate the *Blitzkuchen* once baked by a German prisoner: 'the prisoner pounded almonds to a fine paste between two lake rocks. Took the eggs, just the yellows in a little tin cup. There was, in my

mother's house, a long piece of wire which he cleverly twisted into a beater of some sort. He began to work things over...' (Erdrich, 2002:135). Ironically enough, he fails.

2.4 Scenery and Environment. 'Deep in the past during a spectacular cruel raid upon an isolated Ojibwa village' (2002:3), the Native Americans knew how to live in the middle of nature to find shelter and peace. The major activities of their life were closely linked to the cycles and changes of nature which was considered to be Mother's Womb.

In opposition to this, modern Indians are caught and lost in the intricate network of civilization, like in a prison: 'Bismarck, North Dakota, center of the universe. Locus of space and time for me and my Ninimoshe. We turn in, take a room at the motel's end. I lead her in first and I close the door behind and then she turns to me – suddenly, she knows she is caught' (Erdrich, 2002:30).

3. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, it is not difficult to notice that the Ojibwa culture is gradually fading away. Although there are numberless traces of this ancient and very interesting culture, it seems that there is no future or hope for those who have not known how to adapt to the new ways of life. Further research will reveal other new issues in this field as there still are unknown aspects which are to be deciphered.

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